

## Studying Sexual Images

### Introduction

by Chuck Kleinhans

This Special Section brings together several articles on the process and problems of teaching about representations of sexuality. In addition, it concludes with an examination of some recent independent films and tapes which take new looks at sexuality. Therefore these articles can serve to mark yet another change in the ongoing controversy about sexual representation in the public sphere: a moment in which academics and artists are diffusing new analyses of visual pornography.

In the current Gingrichian moment, political and religious conservatives seem more seriously bent on punishing poor women and children and removing the social welfare safety net than effectively eliminating pornography, censoring performance artists, or criminalizing flag burning. Of course, such hot button issues will continue to be an effervescent part of rousting the rank and file of the right and playing the Presidential race game. Thus, sex and violence in mass media can always be honked about, especially in film and pop music--arts primarily supported by constituencies that can't or don't vote. Adolescents at risk due to Calvin Klein ads make good pundit fare. And "porn on the internet" can be used to scare parents and sell magazines, but deregulation of communications is the longterm norm.

This is not to say we shouldn't be concerned and active in responding to rightwing efforts to censor the Internet, decry rap music lyrics, or reduce or eliminate the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities. But we need to see that these are often skirmishes in a larger war, and make the connections again and again to global changes. Pedophiles exchanging child pornography on the internet is a relatively small and discrete problem. But are the politicians who are getting so worked up over it willing to admit that World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and free trade agreement policies have a direct and massive effect on child mortality rates, child prostitution, and tourist sex industries in the developing world? How many children's lives are lost, sooner or later (with AIDS and other STDs), by capitalism's insistence on slave wages and starvation abroad and cuts in Medicaid at home?

In the long view, the history of sexual images in public circulation over the past 50 years reveals contradictions being worked out with greater explicitness and greater subtlety. Social forces were unleashed during World War 2 in North America, leading to more opportunities for women, minorities, and gays and lesbians. The consequences of these social changes could not be restrained in the long run. The genie wouldn't go easily back in the bottle. Thus the public artifact of the Betty Grable wartime pinup is the trace of a hidden government policy decision: to conduct the war without official military prostitution, but to substitute visual pornography supplied by Hollywood. Officially sanctioned masturbation to star images has been left out of the recent wave of commemoratives to WW2, but the legacy remains.[1]

Forty years ago *Playboy* emerged and moved the same sexualized female images from disreputable to mainstream, while literary censorship crumbled and allowed *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the Henry Miller novels, and other sexually explicit works to be published. The so-called Sexual Revolution of the 60s combined a material basis (guns and butter economy, the developing teen market, oral contraceptives, etc.) with political upheaval (civil rights organizing, urban ghetto rebellions, antiwar protests) and cultural expression (taboo breaking experimental films, underground newspapers, and rock music). As experienced, such a time could only be contradictory and complicated, but there was an undeniable sense at the time that an alternative public space, a counterculture, was being formed.

The optimistic upsurge of feminist and gay/lesbian organizing in the 70s was matched by the petering out of anti-imperialist projects as the Vietnam war wound down and ended, the fragmentation of African-American and political left organizations, and stagnation and retreat by organized labor in the face of Nixonomics. At the decade's start, hardcore films emerged above ground, and it seemed that more explicitness in public visual space was the norm. But the end of the 70s saw a backlash with the election of Reagan and the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment. As the 80s began, a West-Coast-based feminist effort to criticize mainstream media violence and sexism using traditional pressure group tactics metamorphosed into the New York Women Against Pornography with a high profile protest image and direct action against adult film theatres and bookstores. Soon feminists took issue with other feminists as the "sex wars" debate erupted around questions of censorship and the politics of representations. [See articles in *Jump Cut* 26 (1981), 30 (1985) and 32(1987).]

By the end of the 80s a new visual syntax for sexuality had developed with MTV's explicit coyness, while the proliferation of VCRs took porn films out of male audience theatres and into the home. The breast implant became as unremarkable a bit of cosmetic surgery as the nose job was twenty years earlier. As the threat of AIDS increased the need for public information on sexuality, Senator Helms and Representative Danamayer tried to halt any sex education except abstinence, blocked research funding on sexual behavior, and took out after the National Endowment for the Arts grants to controversial artists who dared deal with the body, sexuality, AIDS, and other issues. Gradually the art world responded, and surprisingly became more completely politicized than during the Vietnam War. Meanwhile TV evangelists joined the ranks of aspiring politicians who were caught publicly in compromising sex.

Today we live in an equally contradictory time, but the connections are much harder to see, harder to make. While the right continues to demonize images, and Bob Dole prattles on about films he hasn't seen, the fact remains that the mainstream media acts out ideas that the right would love to proscribe: lesbian kissing on *Roseanne*, gay lovers on *Melrose Place*, K. D. Lang as lesbian chic cover girl. While wringing their hands about the Internet, the congressional majority is studiously indifferent to an increasingly deregulated (and increasingly well-lobbied) cable television market that delivers pay-per-view genital features, a steady stream of softcore drama on Showtime and Cinemax

channels, plus HBO's most popular series--the *Real Sex* documentaries and sexual self-help shows on CNBC and Lifetime that make Dr. Ruth's advice ten years ago seem prim. Talk radio pushes further in gross-out sputters, and talk show TV has become the equivalent of professional wrestling in campy theatrical put-ons of sexual situations. The Blockbuster video rental chain, which started out with an explicit conservative bent (family values promoted, no NC-17 tapes) has followed the corporate logic of technically maintaining a no porn policy but loading up on softcore and ultraviolent action and horror. Meanwhile white suburban boys become the dominant consumers of misogynist gangsta rap.

In sum: contradictions abound in the field of sexual representations. And while the right continues to try to get that genie back in the bottle, it's perfectly obvious that conservatives' kids, just like everyone else's, enter a highly sexualized public sphere at an early age. The fears expressed by the right about public schools (handing out condoms to grade schoolers!) reflects a deeper anxiety that people have about losing control of their children's space. Since Lyndon Johnson's presidency, the relentless decline of the family wage has forced both parents in those scarce "traditional" families to work, and thus to be away from home, leaving child care to day care workers and television and school. As the child goes from home with mommy to preschool, these anxieties can be blown into wildfire moral panics: witness the McMartin Preschool case and other false scares of day care workers sexually molesting kids. How else to explain the panic belief that Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders was going to institute government mandated masturbation training for schoolchildren?

To consider uneven developments in the field of public sexual representation more closely, we've grouped these articles together. Two British critics, Beverly Skeggs and Pat Kirkham, begin with a survey of recent work in the U.K. and U.S. raising issues around pornography, and then proceed to interview some U.S. women who have taught pornography in universities. The difference between the situation in the two countries is revealing, because in the U.K. no films or videos showing explicit genital activity can be screened. (At the same time, sexual joking on the BBC and commercial TV in Britain is far more explicit than allowed in U.S. network fare.) Thus, even when U.S. film scholar Linda Williams was invited to speak at a conference on pornography in London a few years ago, the actual films she discusses in her book, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* could not be screened at the National Film Theatre conference site. (Again, at the same time, a holiday in Amsterdam or Paris can provide a cornucopia of pornography.)

Fear of images erupts in even the most nominally progressive circles when it comes to sexual representations. Case in point: the impressive new anthology *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Duke Univ. Press, 1995) reprints Tom Waugh's pioneering comparison of gay and straight porn from *Jump Cut* 30 with an updated discussion of the hassles around the article's original hard core images, but amazingly without the original images. And Waugh's groundbreaking history of gay images, *Hard To Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film* (Columbia Univ. Press, forthcoming) remains slowed down by

lawyers and editors anxious about showing penises. On the other hand, Peter Lehman's *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body* (Temple Univ. Press, 1993) was published with appropriate illustrations, and Routledge allowed a few male organs to be seen in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Films and Video*, ed. Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar (1993). Needless to say, we faced the same problems and questions in selecting images for this special section. But the idea that we can somehow talk about, think about, and analyze images without seeing what we are talking about seems truly bizarre when entertainment and advertising proliferate more and more different sexual images.

The recent emergence in higher education of a serious consideration of pornographic and other sexual representations marks an important change in the discussion. Previously such matters were the province of law and speech discussions of the First Amendment, art historical considerations of the nude, and sometimes media studies of European art cinema. The current discussion is heavily indebted to feminist and queer analyses of gender and sexual image material. Because of this teaching sexual images takes on a new set of concerns and recasts old ones.

This became very clear in several events at the 1995 Society for Cinema Studies conference which Ramona Curry reports on and analyzes here. Ironically the conference hotel site, in the middle of the theatre district, was a few blocks north of the 42nd Street porn strip that 15 years earlier Women Against Pornography (with free rent from real estate developers) had organized against with a famous slide show and tour of the combat zone. The net effect of such anti-porn efforts in midtown Manhattan was visually obvious at the conference. Old porn theatres on 42nd street were boarded up (with artist-created poems and statements on the marquees, thanks to an art in public places project) awaiting the developer's wrecking ball and a glorious high rent future. Meanwhile the various theatres, strip shows, bookstores and such had been squeezed into marginal spaces in the adjoining neighborhoods, so that instead of a two-block concentration, porn and sleaze was dispersed everywhere. Out of town families walking down Broadway to see the Letterman show or *Cats* faced a porn theatre every block or so, plus homeless guys on every corner making a few bucks handing out flyers for massage parlors, video arcades, and live sex act clubs.

Following this overview, two articles consider the practical matters of teaching porn in greater depth. Chuck Kleinhans relates his experience with a graduate course at Northwestern University while Kate Kane elaborates her course on the body at DePaul University. Both emphasize the need to structure a good environment for classroom examination of the issues. Finally, Laura Marks takes a look at some recent films and tapes which examine sexual issues with a new frankness. Such new expressions offer new possibilities for representing sexuality and further transforming the public sphere.

## NOTES

1. See Jane Gaines, "Popular Icon as Commodity and Sign: The Circulation of Betty Grable, 1941-1945." Diss., Northwestern Univ., 1982.

